

# The Angels' Comeback

## A Retrospect at the Turn of the Millenium

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### 1. Symbols of Change

"Ten years before the turn of the millennium the heavens open again. As in the age of our forefathers there is a busy crossing of the borderline. The angels come back! At least writers and film-makers hear their wings growing. A sign that the saving power is approaching in apocalyptic danger? An escape into the illusionary, because we cannot endure the unbearable loneliness of our cosmic existence?"<sup>1</sup> By this blow into the horn I wanted to point out the spiritual dimension of the great historical event to the readers of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* immediately after the tumbling of the Wall and the political change in 1989. A glance into religion history teaches us that angels always turn up in times of crisis. When religious cult loses its attractiveness, when political systems lack stability and an apocalyptic mood spreads out – then the saving is near right in the centre of these dangers. Their presence indicates a place of doom, an experience of pain, an hour of mourning. But in the moment when the angel appears, the process of recovering and restoring already begins. That is why angels are symbols of change.

No one reckoned with the comeback of angels about the turn of the millennium. The great theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century had simply forgotten them or were ashamed of them. As a reviewer working for several newspapers I noticed the increasing presence of angels in novels, stories and autobiographies. Inspired by her childhood-memories Isolde Ohlbaum<sup>2</sup> published her first photos of sepulchral angels. In the same year, 1986, Wim Wender's film "Der Himmel über Berlin"<sup>3</sup> was premiered. This film consisting of a sequence of scenes had a popular

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1 Wolff, Engel Flügel; cf. Wolff, Wiederkehr. Stubbe, Wirklichkeit, refers to this.

2 Ohlbaum, Lust; Licht; Flügel.

3 Wenders / Handke, Himmel.

remake, "City of Angels". In a key-scene the two angels Damiel (Bruno Ganz) and Cassiel (Otto Sander) pass through the Wall dividing Berlin. This passing across the border became the basic model of the events of November 1989. That walls may give way and the heavens may open again, that creation changes and man with it, this is proclaimed by the film as in Biblical times. My article for the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* had been given to the editorial staff a short time after the tumbling of the Wall. I would have loved to have it printed right away. But Martin Meyer, the editor in charge, thought that the angels have patience. To reassure myself I wrote the book "Breit aus die Flügel beide"<sup>4</sup> ["Spread both your wings"]; in this I related biblical tradition and the discourse on angels in art, poetry, and autobiography to seven phases in life. In vain I tried to have it accepted by a publisher. Angels are no longer a subject selling in the book market, I heard time and again. At last, the book was published by Herder in 1993.

In the meantime a life without angels cannot be imagined in modern feeling. As products of art and as kitsch they are available in drug-stores and flower-shops, they decorate biscuit boxes and underwear made by the company "Viva Maria", or they are ornaments on little gift-books, the production of which has become uncountable. In general usage the word "angel" has become a synonym of readiness to help. People who unselfishly serve other men are called "angels", like Mother Theresa from Calcutta. Modern techniques of reproducing artefacts make classical pictures of angels omnipresent on postcards, calendars and in book illustrations. They inspire artists to work again on the myth of the angel. The range of meaning is so wide that the angel is also suitable as a memorial of the persecution of homosexuals, as Rosemarie Prockel has demonstrated by her "Frankfurter Engel".<sup>5</sup> Books on angels are as numerous as the celestial choirs themselves. Some editions are sold millions of times – like Anselm Grün's "50 Engel für das Jahr". With many readers collected personal experiences and anecdotes are extremely popular – like "Ich geb' dir einen Engel mit".<sup>6</sup>

Readers of literature on angels are not interested in theories and theology, but in experience. Mystic experiences and communications from the inner world, the esoteric field of religions, are asked for. Readers who are interested in the subject of "angels" are looking for stimuli to consider their own life reflected in another reality and to contact this through techniques of meditation, oracles and prayers.<sup>7</sup> This new yearn-

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4 Wolff, Flügel.

5 Initiative Mahnmal Homosexuellenverfolgung e.V. (ed.), Frankfurter Engel.

6 Westphal, Engel.

7 Wallimann, Engeln.

ing for spirituality is no romantic escape from the present world, but a complement of the one-sided rationalistic concept of reality.<sup>8</sup> As an assistance for learning to practice insights into the background area of the visible world even grown-up readers increasingly have recourse to children's books on angels.<sup>9</sup>

Meanwhile the angels' comeback is evident. Not everything, that is put on the book-market in great numbers, is substantial. Therefore, we need not tarry with criticizing the numerous esoteric books on angels which are often nothing else than self-elevation and projection. As a *connecting theme* of all big monotheistic religions, as *experience impersonated* in the supreme poetry of mankind, and as *guides* through the labyrinth of life, angels testify to divine presence throughout the ages. Our age has a great need for genuine experience, for contacting the lasting, for encountering the origin of life. Who talks about the angels, always talks about the experience of transcending everyday life and the limits of one's own personality. The angels' song is the Trishagion "Holy, holy, holy" (Isa 6:3) in celebrating the Eucharist, which joins together heaven and earth. To experience the holy as *mysterium et fascinosum* is the focus of any talking about angels, at last. It always aims at the ultimate source of reality: Thus every experience of angels is an experience of the divine.

Prompted by her own experience Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann has carried out several opinion polls<sup>10</sup> concerning the Germans' belief in angels. In 1997, 32% of the German population were convinced of the existence of angels, 37% in Western, 14% in Eastern Germany. A second poll in September 2000 showed that the belief in angels among males had decreased. Whereas in 1997 23% of the male population still believed in angels, in 2000 only 16% did so. The number of 40% women convinced of the angels' existence remained constant. Even more people believed that guardian angels exist. To the question "Do you think that you have a personal guardian angel, or do you not believe this?" 47% of the persons interviewed in Western Germany answered in the affirmative, 18% did not deny the existence of guardian angels. That is 60% in Western and 39% in Eastern Germany, who had a positive relation to guardian angels. In the USA even 69% of the interviewed believed in guardian angels.

The ideas about the function of guardian angels are quite clear. To the question what one would talk about to one's guardian angel there

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8 Cf. Abadie, *Everything*s.

9 Cf. Fine, Engel; Tamaro, Tobias; Bauer, Opas; Heinlein, Schutzengel; Timm / Scheffler, Schutzbengel.

10 Noelle-Neumann / Piel, Engel; Noelle-Neumann / Petersen, *Begegnung*.

were given the following answers: about life and death (43%), sense of life and task of one's life (34%), disease and healing (33%), the situation of the world in the third millennium (26%), love, married life and partnership (25%), possibilities of co-operating with angels (20%), work and profession (18%) or problems of education (10%). There were also clear ideas about the functions of angels. They protect men in dangerous situations (44%), accompany them in life (38%), warn of dangers (23%), comfort and encourage the desperate (21%), guide the dying into heaven (17%), communicate divine messages (16%), intervene in one's life (13%) and effect a change for the better.

## 2. Angels in Autobiographies : Key-experiences

The German diplomat and writer Erwin Wickert introduces his autobiography with an experience he had with a guardian angel. It is about falling down several stairs which the three-year-old boy suffered, but which he survived unhurt. Experiencing rescue is often described in terms of an experience of the guardian angel, though this does not lead to a certain commitment to a belief: "Even decades later, when I had long ago lost my faith in the miracles of the Bible, unfortunately including Christ's resurrection, I did not want to let go the belief in angels which had supported me once. I still felt him carrying me downstairs softly."<sup>11</sup> Wickert, too, talks about the secrecy of this experience: "I never talked about the angel, not to anyone, I have concealed the secret inside me."<sup>12</sup>

The grand old lady of public opinion research, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, recalls experiencing guardian angels in her early childhood. At the age of five she perceived an appearance of light in her room, which remained inexplicable in spite of thorough research the next morning. Nobody had entered the room, and nobody had kindled any light. "When I had asked everyone, and nobody had entered my room during the night, I said to myself: Then it must have been the angels. That was the secret. From now on I kept it – and up to the present it remained secret. I have never forgotten it, always thought of it. What a comfort."<sup>13</sup>

Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann and Edgar Piel are certain that the belief in angels proves a newly inflamed awareness of transcendancy. "It is

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11 Wickert, Mut 14.

12 Wickert, Mut 14.

13 Noelle-Neumann, Engel.

just this dimension which makes the belief in angels besides many other signs and indications, relevant and important as an answer to any lack of transcendency. (...) The slowly increasing belief in angels, however, is indicating that something else is developing gradually and rather quietly below the general level of perception. To what extent this other will finally influence our future is hardly predictable at the moment."<sup>14</sup>

Friedrich Cramer, too, physician in Göttingen and former head of the Max-Planck-Institute for Experimental Medical Science, gives an account of experiencing a guardian angel. In September 1942 Cramer, aged 18 at that time, was severely wounded at the curve of the river Don. Experiencing nearly death he visualizes the panorama of his life. The sum of this experience of identity right in extreme physical danger he later sums up in the sentence: "Everything, everything is there, nothing is lost."<sup>15</sup> So experiences of angels in the present age do not only talk about moments of lucky coincidence and being rescued out of danger, but also about protection against disaster. The secret which is mentioned again and again in the context of experiencing angels, surrounds the mystery of the heart of a person which is experienced as indestructible in spite of illness, pain and threatening death. Especially the research in the process of dying by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross<sup>16</sup> has dealt with this time and again. The Swiss physician returned to an old idea, namely that the soul of the poor Lazarus was carried to heaven by the angels after his death (Luke 16:22). Insofar any further thinking on experiences of angels leads to the basic problems of theodicy (Does God intervene in my life?) and the understanding of reality (Is there an immortal soul? Is there a reality that cannot be measured empirically and nevertheless determines my life?).

Numerous autobiographical confessions indicate how obvious it has become again in the meantime to talk about angels. In her last interview Marion Gräfin Dönhoff declared her belief in her guardian angel in public: "Of course does he exist. I have a guardian angel of my own. I am perfectly convinced of this. (...) I am just certain that my guardian angel is there."<sup>17</sup>

What does the angel actually guard? This question leads to a region that does no longer belong to this world. Dietrich Bonhoeffer talked about this in his well-known angel-poem dealing with favourable pow-

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14 Noelle-Neumann / Piel, *Engel* 37f.

15 Cramer, *Kindheit* 10. An experience of death coming close is also found in Gaarder, *Spiegel*. The angel Ariel here accompanies the dying Cecilie.

16 Kübler-Ross, *Freunde*.

17 Dönhoff, *Gespräch*; quoted according to Wolff, *Buch* 56ff.

ers. It is a key-document among modern autobiographical testimonies of the angels' operating, because it is void of any suspicion of being stylized. The song deeply immerses into the night in Gethsemane and resumes the motif of the bitter chalice which is handed to Jesus by an angel (Luke 22:43). God's presence and redemption paradoxically show in suffering. Bonhoeffer's angel-experience talks about the union of human and divine will. In his letter written in prison on December 10, 1944, Bonhoeffer mentions the old traditional children's prayer of the fourteen angels that inspired Paul Gerhardt to write his evening song "Nun ruhen alle Wälder" which was set to music by Johannes Brahms: "It is a great invisible kingdom where one lives and the reality of which one does not doubt. When the old children's song says about the angels 'zweie, die mich decken, zweie, die mich wecken', then this protection at night and in the morning by favourable invisible powers is something we adults today need less than the children do. You must not think that I am unhappy."<sup>18</sup>

Experiences of this kind are told in modern autobiographies time and again. Research can gather from these typical characteristics of modern ways of talking about angels: (1) The word "angel-experience" describes extraordinary events in the curriculum vitae which become firmly impressed on the mind as traces of memory. (2) These experiences are often connected with paranormal perceptions like appearances of light. (3) The persons concerned experience these moments in their life as key-experiences. (4) They observe that these experiences resist any rational analysis as well as any verbalization. (5) These experiences always have something to do with the problems of identity. It is all about work and profession, about sense and purpose of one's own life, but only seldom about religious or even ecclesiastical commitment. (6) Modern angel-experience is a direct connection between deity and the soul. It is not about ecclesiastical or confessional commitment, but about the direct connection to God. (7) Angel-experiences are transconfessional. They indicate a new form of spiritual development towards a theocentric belief that ignores any difference between the religions.

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18 German original: "Es ist ein großes unsichtbares Reich, in dem man lebt und an dessen Realität man keinen Zweifel hat. Wenn es im alten Kinderlied von den Engeln heißt: 'zweie, die mich decken, zweie, die mich wecken', so ist diese Bewahrung am Abend und am Morgen durch gute unsichtbare Mächte etwas, was wir Erwachsenen heute nicht weniger brauchen als die Kinder. Du darfst also nicht denken, ich sei unglücklich."

Bonhoeffer, Mächten; quoted according to Wolff, Buch 170f.

### 3. Angel-revelations: Literature on Angels

Time and again, people claimed to have taken a glimpse beyond the veil of reality. Emanuel von Swedenborg (1688-1772), Heinrich Jung-Stilling (1740-1817) and Jakob Lorbeer (1800-1864) were among these. The nurse Joé Snell saw an angel in her nursery at the age of twelve, i.e. at the beginning of puberty. Since then she followed the trace of the celestial. In her autobiographical "Der Dienst der Engel" she later gave an account of her observations in the intensive care units of several hospitals. She also talks about transportations to heaven whose streets and houses she describes in detail. The angel-visions "Ein Büchlein von den Engeln"<sup>19</sup> by Mechthild Thaller-von Schönwerth were published posthumously under the pseudonym Ancilla Domini ("maid of the Lord"). Wladimir Lindenberg's "Gottes Boten unter uns"<sup>20</sup> is also a modern classic among angel-books. The Russian physician Lindenberg closely connected talking about angels with the interpretation of his own biography. To him angels are symbols of experiencing the miraculous in life. They testify to a second reality beyond the visible world, which accompanies every human's life in a mysterious way: "who pays attention to the signs, will receive them."<sup>21</sup>

Among the most famous private revelations are the records of 88 angel-conversations which Gitta Mallasz published under the title "Die Antwort der Engel" (1981).<sup>22</sup> They were written in Hungary during the war in 1943/44 and were revised later. Many who sympathize with angels regard them as authentic. Gitta Mallasz wrote down revelations of angels that her friends Hanna and Lilli regularly received on Fridays at 3.00 p.m. at the hour of Jesus's death. With this hour of the day she already alludes to the passion of her Jewish friends Hanna, Joseph and Lilli. They were confined by Hungarian Nazis on November 2, 1944. Hanna and Lilli had refused to take the opportunity of escape in order to rescue the life of their friend Gitta. All of them died, only Gitta Mallasz survived. Not by coincidence her surname reminds of the Hebrew word "malak" ("angel"). By the publication she created a memorial of her friends.

How do women perceive the message of the angels? How does an angel speak? The documents also offer information about this. Hanna talks about an extension of perceiving. She could see all inward and

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19 Lama, Büchlein.

20 Lindenberg, Gottes.

21 Lindenberg, Gottes 67.

22 Mallasz, Antwort; Mallasz, Engel.

outward events with a great clarity and feel the presence of the angel as an animating power. She had to translate the angels' communications into human language. The angels' last word in the political catastrophe was: "Glaubt es: Das ewige Sein ist schon euer."<sup>23</sup> From the point of view of angel-research this is a modern Act of martyrs. Already the narrative of the stoning of the first Christian martyr Stephanus and the Act of Perpetua's martyrdom report visions of angels. Angels use to appear increasingly in apocalyptic times. What is the sense of this angelic message? At last, it is not words, Gitta Mallasz thinks, but images of an inward dynamism and the discovery of a creative power which helps people to overcome.

Experiences of guardian angels are not always available. Like final attitudes or religious faith they cannot be created at will. But the broad interest in experiences of guardian angels prompts further inquiry into one's own experiences. Do I also have a guardian angel? How can I experience him? To these questions a broad market reacts, offering mediatory services. They are nearly exclusively supplied by women. Visions of angels in modern times have a long tradition. Formerly they were reserved to prophets and saints and always led into the centre of divine encounters. In modern times they came to express an individualization and autonomy of the religious conscious self. To have a vision or to know someone who has visionary insights into other worlds, was also a sign of being independent of traditional ecclesiastical intermediaries.

#### 4. Angelic Revelations: the Basis of Creating a Religious Community

Angelic revelations and consecrations are also familiar to the Opus Angelorum or Engelwerk founded by Gabriele Bitterlich (1896-1978) in 1961. Since her childhood Gabriele Bitterlich had visions of angels and she could allegedly see her guardian angel. In 1947 her confessant advised the mother of six to preserve the angelic message in a spiritual diary. Two years later an angel commanded her to write her first book. Its title is "Das Reich der Engel" ("Kingdom of Angels"). In 1961 Gabriele Bitterlich moves to Castle St. Petersburg in Silz/ Tyrol. What she had visualized in images was interpreted by priests and collected in a manual of meditation for praying as practised by the members of the Engelwerk. They take themselves to be a praying community support-

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23 "Believe it: you already possess the everlasting existence", Mallasz, Engel 410.



ing the next generation of priests in the Catholic Church. Further characteristics of their spiritual life are the fight against demons and to become absorbed in Christ's atoning suffering. This includes the daily confession and celebration of the Eucharist. This is practised in the traditional way as oral Communion. With Gabriele Bitterlich her identification with Christ went so far that it is said that she even wore the stigmata.

The *Corpus Operis Angelorum* (COA) has local establishments in Augsburg, Freiburg i. Br., Vienna and Rome. Besides the monastery St. Petersberg there is St. Mattias in Schondorf/ Ammersee. Priests are educated at a special university in Anapolis/ Brazil. Initiation in the mysteries of worshipping the angels takes place in five steps: promise to the guardian angel, consecration to the guardian angel, admission to the circle of assistants, angel-consecration and atonement-consecration. The writings of the *Engelwerk*<sup>24</sup> are exclusively dedicated to members and friends. Each single edition has a number and is returned to the order after the death of its owner. Like Dionysius Areopagita, Hildegard of Bingen and the sacred Catholic tradition, the *Engelwerk* speaks of nine celestial choirs of angels. This traditional doctrine is elaborated in detail. A concrete task is attributed to each choir. An everlasting calendar of angels informs about the individual angel of the day. The member of the order can look up which angel is in charge on the respective day. Besides that name, the saint of the day is mentioned as well as the angelic choir and the symbol designating the angel. A short text informs about the angelic personality, his tasks and the name he is invoked by. A prayer concludes the entries. Gabriele Bitterlich died in 1978. Her successor is Georg Blasko. Her son Hansjörg Bitterlich is the Prior of the order "Regularkanoniker vom Heiligen Kreuz". When Rome after thorough scrutiny disapproved of certain writings and practices of the *Engelwerk*, *Opus Angelorum* formally submitted.

## 5. Anthroposophy: Angels as Educators

The belief in the guardian angel is bound to the idea that there is a deity who takes care of the individual's destiny, but does not demand any confessional or institutional religious commitment. Parents who decided not to have their children baptized, nevertheless often believe that a personal guardian angel exists. That is why the figure of the guardian angel not only returns in numerous reproductions of kitsch-

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24 Schutzengelbruderschaft, Tagesengel.

illustrations originating in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; it is found in the context of many parents' seriously reflecting on basic problems of education. Whereas pedagogues in the seventies took it for granted that man was essentially shaped by environmental influences, family, school and society, today transpersonal influences such as destiny and character are taken into consideration again. Against this background there is a new open-mindedness for an anthroposophic concept of man, as the therapeutic pedagogue Henning Köhler holds it. He takes the guardian angel as the genius of man, a superior authority which directs the inward life of the child by the voice of conscience: "In der Tat ist die Begegnung mit dem Genius nicht nur motivierend, sondern auch riskant. Denn indem uns gezeigt wird, wozu wir aus Liebekräften imstande sind, bleibt uns die Bilanz unserer Versäumnisse, Selbstflügen und Anmaßungen nicht erspart. Ich erkenne, dem Wink des Engels folgend, die Fülle meiner Möglichkeiten und zugleich meine Schwäche, mein Versagen, das Ausmaß meiner opportunistischen Anpassungsbereitschaft; ich sehe, über welches Kapital ich verfüge, aber auch, wie viel Kapital ich ständig veruntreue."<sup>25</sup>

Some Rudolf Steiner kindergartens bear the name of the Archangel Raphael or have Michael for their patron. This signalizes to children and their parents: Here are people who are open for the influence of angels and their educative work.<sup>26</sup> That angels have a pedagogic function, Rudolf Steiner already emphasized. In his lecture "Was tut der Engel in unserem Astralleib?" held before the Anthroposophische Gesellschaft in Zurich (October 9, 1918) he alluded to the doctrine of angels. It is closely connected to the pedagogue's commission to guide men, which Steiner took to be his personal vocation. Man is guided by the angels whether he knows it or not. The knowing or awakened can become partners of angels. By the end of time they will form the tenth choir of angels. So Hildegard of Bingen had taught it, so Rainer Maria Rilke wrote it in verse in his "Duineser Elegien". The sleeping are the opposite to the awakened. The former are ignorant of the angelic guidance and of the reality of superior worlds. Rudolf Steiner's anthroposophy addresses both groups, since he is convinced that mankind is edu-

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25 "Indeed, meeting the genius is not only motivating, but also risky. By showing us to what powers of love enable us, we are not saved from recognizing the amount of our negligence, self-delusion and presumption. Following the angel's hint, I recognize the abundance of my possibilities and at the same time my weakness, my failure, the extent of my readiness to be conformable because of opportunism; I see what capital I have at my disposal, but also how much of it I continually misappropriate." Köhler, Was haben wir falsch gemacht?

26 Cf. Fischer, Kind 146-154; Schroeder, Mensch; Debus / Dellbrügger, Engel-Erfahrungen.

catable. Men must not remain what he has been. Steiner assumes that human nature is divided into body, soul and spirit, and he teaches the tripartite structure of man: a physical body, an ethereal body and an astral body. Now the angels have the function to give impulses for our way of living. In the first place they do this through our dreams. Each man is touched by the angel in his dream. Talking according to Steiner the angel thus contacts the ethereal body. Christian Morgenstern became an adherent of anthroposophy after he had listened to several lectures Steiner had held in Kristiania (Oslo); he described the nightly conversation between the ethereal body and the angel in a poem:

"Stör' nicht den Schlaf der liebsten Frau, mein Licht!  
Stör' ihren zarten, zarten Schlummer nicht!  
Wie ist sie ferne jetzt. Und doch so nah.  
Ein Flüstern – und sie wäre wieder da.  
Sei still, mein Herz, sei stiller noch, mein Mund,  
mit Engeln redet wohl ihr Geist zur Stund."<sup>27</sup>

But man shall not remain sleeping, he shall become an awakened. He has the opportunity to experience the angel when he has reached a higher level of consciousness, as angels also shape, within the astral body, the soul of consciousness, images, visions, flashlights of thinking, inspiration which point to the future and promote the development of mankind towards a superior spiritual level. It is the function of education to sharpen children's and adults' attention for the reality of such images.

Anthroposophy regards itself as promoting a process of waking in order to perceive the angels' world and their operations. Steiner recommends a short interrupting as an exercise in the evening, when the events of the day are recalled with a vigilant spirit. Each man will then come across a small or great experience that has occurred in his life. Steiner is certain: no day will pass without a miracle. The question what might have happened today also leads to an intensified experience of guidance.

"Von der Beobachtung des Negativen in unserem Leben, das aber von der weisheitlichen Führung unseres Lebens Zeugnis ablegen kann, bis zu der Beobachtung des webenden und wirkenden Engels in unserem astralischen Leibe ist ein gerader Weg, ein recht gerader Weg, den wir einschlagen können."<sup>28</sup>

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27 Morgenstern, *Wir fanden einen Pfad*; zitiert nach Wolff, Buch 138.

28 Steiner, *Engel* 31.

## 6. Poetry: Rilke

Rainer Maria Rilke experienced a serious crisis in his life when he accepted an invitation from his friend Marie von Thurn und Taxis-Hohenlohe to spend the winter at her castle Duino near the Adriatic Sea. "Doctor Serafico", as she called the poet, had left the Catholic Church, divorcing Christa Westhoff was about to happen and he was thinking things over. Rilke was 36 years old and in a phase of life when many people find some breakthrough towards a new encounter with angels after struggling for a long time. In Castle Duino he found loneliness which was a presupposition for any real intensified experience for him. On January 20, 1912 Rilke received a letter from his lawyer. The imminent separation from his wife and child was an extreme burden for him. He left the castle, went down the path to the sea and suddenly he heard voices.

"Wer, wenn ich schrie, hörte mich denn aus der Engel Ordnungen?"<sup>29</sup>

This is the beginning of one of the most important poetry on angels in world literature. As Mary received the words of the Archangel Gabriel, so Rilke would have received them as pure revelation. That very evening he writes down the first of the "Duineser Elegien". The second one followed soon, then fragments, then the writing came to a stop. Ten years will go by until the ten "Duineser Elegien" are finished, ten years of struggling with the angel. Many people are familiar with this struggling, even if they are not poets or artists, because heaven rises above every man. It happens in a moment, in fragments of a second. To remember the experience, to shape it within one's own heart, to have it work and grow in the inner space of the soul's world – that is a long and painful process. To express it with words is granted to the poet. That is his gift and his commission. That is why communicating it is obligatory.

On February 11, 1922 he completed the song of "der Engel Ordnungen" at Castle Muzot after he had more and more internalized his heart. Immediately he announced the elegies' birth to his friend Lou Andreas-Salome in Göttingen. He felt like Mary after giving birth to Jesus, speaks of "miracle, grace",<sup>30</sup> and his friend joins in this supreme comparison:

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29 Rilke, *Duineser Elegien* 7; cf. Czernin, *Duino*.

30 Rilke / Andreas-Salome, *Briefwechsel* 444; (Rilkes Brief vom 11. Februar 1922 an Lou Andreas-Salome).

"Möglich wohl, dass eine Reaktion eintritt, weil das Geschöpf den Schöpfer aushalten musste, dann lass Dich davon nicht erschrecken (so fühlten sich auch die Marien nach ihrem Zimmermann unfasslichen Geburt)." <sup>31</sup>

Rilke's ten angelic songs are published at a time when the sacred as the core of divine encounter is rediscovered. The familiar kitschy presentation of angels in the 19<sup>th</sup> century had indicated a bourgeois sentimentality. Liberal Protestant theologians had tried in vain to make the Bible socially acceptable among the learned, also in vain were the Papal attempts to obstruct modernism. Then Rudolf Otto discovered the holy as a deep mystery which fascinates and horrifies men at the same time. Seraphim and Cherubim have praised this divine holiness. Rilke who cannot be incorporated in a superficially interpreted history of Christian piety resumes their song: "Ein jeder Engel ist schrecklich", <sup>32</sup> he says. Angels protect, guard and rescue, certainly, but sometimes we experience their greatness and strangeness, and facing their holiness we become aware how far away we are from them, but also from our own centre.

It is no coincidence that Rilke published exactly ten elegies. He adopts the early church concept of the nine choirs of angels which originated with Dionysios Areopagita. These are the orders and hierarchies the first line talks about. In the tenth elegy Rilke directs his eyes towards heaven and at the tenth angelic choir which will consist of men some day. By the end of time angels and men will be united and sing God's praise now and forever. So Rilke used traditional concepts of heaven, quotes classical narratives about angels – like the book of Tobit – and compares the angel to a looking-glass like Hildegard of Bingen did. But unlike any other poet before him he took man's angelic function seriously. Man and angel shall sing together for God's praise – so the Fathers of the Church had taught it.

But how does a human feel next to an angel? What does he have to say? Can he keep up? But certainly, if man concentrates on that which no angel knows: earthly transient life, his own experiences, art, music, sentiment, pain, love, sensuality. Man has got his own commission. His space is the visible world. It wants to be verbalized by him, wants to become a message, praise in song, as no angel is able to begin to sing:

"Hier ist des Säglichen Zeit, hier seine Heimat.  
Sprich und bekenn." <sup>33</sup>

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31 Rilke / Andreas-Salome, Briefwechsel. 447. (Lou Andreas-Salomes Brief vom 16. Februar 1922 an Rilke).

32 Rilke, Duineser Elegien 11, (Elegie 2).

33 Rilke, Duineser Elegien 34, (Elegie 9).

Man and angel are brothers, partners; each has his own experience of the world, each has his own voice in the celestial choir. The sacred song of Seraphim and Cherubim had seized Rilke. In every age God finds prophets and poets whose hearts are open for the angels' message. Mankind lives on their words.

## 7. "Bleibt, ihr Engel, bleibt bei mir..." – Walter Nigg

The works of the Zurich church historian Walter Nigg (1903-1988) were developed as a conscious contradiction to modern theology. In numerous writings he showed his readers "Great Saints" (1946) as trustworthy examples of Christian existence. Nigg looked for an approach to religious problems which took experience into account. Against this background we have to look at his classical book "Bleibt, ihr Engel, bleibt bei mir ...", published in 1978, which went through numerous editions.

"Der Lehre haftet nun einmal etwas Abstraktes, Intellektuelles, Trockenes an, obwohl man auf sie nicht verzichten kann. Wir aber möchten nicht Theorien und Behauptungen hören, sondern uns geht es um lebendige Erfahrungen, denn sie allein vermitteln dem Menschen eine innere Gewißheit, die ihm niemand rauben kann."<sup>34</sup>

In it Nigg described the expectations of the modern reader of books on angels. The book's title was borrowed from Bach's cantata for Michaelmas, which Nigg interpreted as a prayer.

Nigg wrote this book during the era of terrorism in Germany. He did not only find a severe breaking off of Christian tradition, which had begun when Nietzsche said that God is dead, but he also worried about the spiritual, moral, and cultural existence of Europe:

"Mit schwerem Herzen sieht man den Abbröcklungsprozeß, von dem man nicht sagen kann, wo er hinführt und wo er aufhört. Die Erosion des christlichen Glaubens ist in vollem Gange, und die Folge davon ist eine beispiellose Verarmung. Die Christen befinden sich in religiöser Beziehung in einem Elendzustand, mit dem sie sich nicht abfinden dürfen. Es gilt, sich mit allen Kräften zur Wehr zu setzen."<sup>35</sup>

As a young student in Göttingen he became acquainted with the angels' world through Erik Peterson.<sup>36</sup> Agreeing with Rudolf Otto he in-

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34 Nigg, Engel 14.

35 Nigg, Engel 19.

36 Peterson, Buch; cf. Rosenberg, Begegnung; Rosenberg, Michael; Rosenberg, Engel 1967.

terpreted this world as an expression of encountering the holy which man needs as a corrective:

“Der Christ anerkennt das Geheimnis, läßt das Mysterium gelten und versucht nicht, es analytisch aufzulösen, denn daraus würde nur ein Trümmerhaufen entstehen.”<sup>37</sup>

With Karl Gröning Nigg had selected pictures of angels from classical and modern art and added a comment which was informative and meditative in character. His intention was a pedagogical one. To him one of the main reasons for the loss of faith in modern times was the loss of verbalizing it. The fact that theology was thinking rationally and in terms of science had a decomposing effect in people's awareness. Who wants to re-open a spiritual way of experiencing has to teach them the language of symbols.

“Der religiöse Mensch denkt in Bildern, wie die Kinder und Künstler. Das abstrakte, unanschauliche Denken entspricht ihm nicht, weil es nicht dem unmittelbaren Bereich angehört.”<sup>38</sup>

Nigg hoped that he might make accessible the sources of spirituality for his readers. His analysis of the age was accomplished without any illusions as he saw the “radikale Abkehr von allem Engelglauben”.<sup>39</sup> That his book helped to a comeback of angels in many people's awareness is evident from today's point of view. Nigg thought that only a transconfessional Christianity that would feel related with Judaism and Islam in its mystic core of experience, would continue to exist. The angels seem to be messengers of this mystic religious practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 8. Statements for Further Discussion

The following statements are intended to stimulate talking about god's angels in a responsible way. They are intended to show that angels provide starting points for an interreligious, intercultural dialogue embracing all ages in time and personal life. The angel opens up access to concepts of faith in history and presence and makes possible the classical dialogue between Christian and non-Christian images of god in teaching religion and in parish work.

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37 Peterson, Buch 13.

38 Peterson, Buch 23.

39 Peterson, Buch 7.

## Statement 1

Angels belong to the vocabulary of revelation. The entire Bible testifies to God's operating through angels in the Old and New Testament.

## Statement 2

Angels belong to the vocabulary of all monotheistic religions. Christianity shares the intermediating angelic figure with the great monotheistic brother-religions Islam and Judaism. Inter-religious dialogue guided by the aspect of the concept of angels leads up to recognizing common traditions of speech and revelation and thus to tolerance.

## Statement 3

Angels belong to the vocabulary common to the Old and New Testament. The figure conveying God's spirit, the angel, is present continually from Genesis up to Revelation. The figure of the angel thus may be a neutral basis for Jewish-Christian dialogue.

## Statement 4

Angels make God a subject of conversation. Talking about the central Biblical medium "angel", opens up a fresh access to the inquiry after God's spirit and its operating. Talking about God's angels provokes curiosity and thinking about God's operating in the world (3<sup>rd</sup> article). It does so more than the formulae of speaking about Christ (Christology) and his importance for man's redemption (soteriology) which has become more and more imprecise. The names of Biblical angels already indicate the deictic character of their appearing.

## Statement 5

Angels direct the attention towards God's spirit. The angels' comeback in poetry, film and art is connected with the quest for a new spirituality.



## Statement 6

Talking about the protecting or guardian angel opens up a new way of thinking about the nature and true state of man before God. As he is a creature humbly devoted to God the angel shows the image of the pure nature of the creator (God's image) and opens up a new access to the term "sin", which is not easily understood today.

## Statement 7

Angels make Christ a subject of conversation. By making the true image of man appear within the world he points to the necessity of redemption.

## Statement 8

Angels set us free from our egotism. From a human point of view they are critical partners in dialogues on psychology, psychoanalysis and anthroposophy.

## Statement 9

Angels set the Christian congregation in a cosmic context. Through songs and prayers in divine service the congregation is part of the universal community praising God.

## Statement 10

Angels create environment. The angel sets a man in ecological contexts and teaches him to regard the world as a unity.

## Statement 11

Angels effect a conversation between Bible, tradition and our age. This regards the Fathers of the Church, the saints from the entire Middle Ages to the present. No Biblical intermediary is as continually present as the angel. The angels' omnipresence in time and space enables us

both to enter into and to compare critically our experience of God with the Biblical one.

Statement 12

Angels encourage oecumenical dialogue. Contrary to the Catholic veneration of Mary and the saints, the angel is an intermediary all confessions share.

Statement 13

The mutual relationship of poetry, art and theology can be demonstrated by the example of the angels. Thus the role of tradition is made obvious as a force that influenced Christian awareness apart from the Bible.

Statement 14

The images of the world and of God in the New Testament were developed by adopting, dissociating and transforming of concepts originating with Israel's historical religious environment. This genesis can be unfolded by considering, as an example, pre-Christian and extra-Christian concepts of angels – as they are found in the Jewish apocryphal tradition.

Statement 15

The angel accompanies man through all stages of life. Talking about angels is part of elementary religious education (praying with the parents, kindergarten, elementary school), where basic and remaining ideas are imprinted, and it is part of talking about the final things (dying, death, resurrection).

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